

# Disobedience as a psychological and moral problem

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



To be human is to be disobedient. For good or evil, disobedience has been the one constant, universal trait that characterized human beings since the beginning of time. Behind every great human achievement is an act of disobedience, a rejection of the conventional wisdom, a defiance of authority, or a decision, a choice made to take the path less travelled. History is replete with men and women who by their disobedience changed history, often for the better, though sometimes for the worse.

Galileo, Italian physicist, mathematician and astronomer, showed his humanity by rejecting Church teaching on the centrality of the Earth in the universe. Instead he championed Heliocentrism, the notion that placed the sun, and not the earth, at the center of the orbital paths of many observable bodies in outer space, a truth since validated by astronomers and mathematicians of his and later times. Galileo, by his disobedience, suffered ignominy for his beliefs; found guilty of heresy by the Roman Inquisition, he was sentenced to serve a prison term and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

But if not for Galileo and others like him, Neil Armstrong would not have been able to land on the moon, nor mechanical human proxies named Sojourner, Opportunity and Curiosity to survey the surface of Mars. Mahatma Gandhi, Indian nationalist, and the man credited with liberating India from British rule led a campaign of non-violent, civil disobedience that made the continued stay in the country by the British colonizers politically and morally untenable.

Imprisoned by the British for fomenting unrest, Gandhi confronted the colonizers' force of arms with the power of his ideas, and the rightness of his cause, and by his act of courageous disobedience prevailed gloriously over the British in the end. Today, India is a vibrant democracy of 1.2 billion people, free because of the disobedience of one frail, unprepossessing man, Mahatma Gandhi. Who or what did Amelia Earhart, America aviation pioneer, disobey that defined her humanity?

Surely, she disobeyed that inner voice, present in all of us, that said circumnavigating the globe in a tiny airplane, hopping from one tiny speck of an island to another in the vastness of the oceans, is pure folly. Surely, she ignored the admonitions of well-meaning family and friends who wished she'd abandon the life fraught with danger and choose a safer earth-bound path and enjoy her fame in quiet retirement. But no, instead of yielding to fear, she defied all her instincts for self-preservation and opted to face the unknown, bravely but tragically at the cost of her life.

Today there's a bit of Amelia Earhart's spirit in every one of the millions of routine take-offs and landings that take place in the world's airports, and in every one of the millions of flights, flown safely and comfortably, across the world's oceans. An American civil rights activist, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. , like Gandhi before him, led a non-violent campaign to end segregation not only in American schools but in American society at large.

Confronting the evil of racism in America head-on, and braving nightsticks, tear gas and guard dogs, he confronted politicians, mayors, policemen and national guardsmen and forced them to face the contradiction of their racism

with the bill of rights enshrined in the American constitution. In the end, he paid for his conviction and disobedience with his life. In a very real sense he paved the way for a Barack Obama, a black man only once removed from his African roots, to assume the highest office in the land only a few generations into the future.

But for all the greatness that disobedience has spawned, it has not always been benign. Most insidious is man's disobedience of conscience, the innate sense of right or wrong that exists intuitively in the minds of every human being. Motivated by fear, greed and hate, and all the primal passions that inhabit man's dark side, these acts of disobedience are called by many names, among other names: the holocaust, ethnic cleansing, warlordism, corruption and rape. And the men and women associated with these atrocities are forever etched in our consciousness: Adolf Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic, Imelda Marcos, Pol Pot and many others.

If disobedience is in man's nature as it is without a doubt, it begs the question: is disobedience a virtue or a vice? The stock answer is it's both. Man is trapped in an endless cycle of good and evil, heroism and villainy, war and peace. Modern day heroes abound and so do tyrants - only the names have changed. The Mandelas of the world juxtapose with the Assads -- all disobeyers of a sort or another, all human beings of a sort or another. History repeats itself, and man is unchanging.